

State of Connecticut

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

Childhood Obesity in Connecticut: Where We Stand

A Health Epidemic

- The prevalence of overweight American children nearly doubled in the past 20 years and nearly tripled for adolescents.
- Nationally, over 50% of all obese six-year olds are projected to become obese adults.
- Connecticut's obesity rate has risen from 11.7% in 1990 to 19.1% in 2004.
- Overweight children face increased risks of Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease.
- Approximately 9% of Connecticut students in grades 9 to 12 are overweight.
- In some Connecticut communities, as many as 25% of children are overweight.
- More than 3,000 people in Connecticut die each year from obesity and its complications.
- In Connecticut, obesity-related health problems cost \$856 million in 2003.

Key Policy Issues on Childhood Obesity

1) **Nutrition standards:** Healthy nutrition environments in schools – from cafeteria lines to concessions to sports games. Strengthen state standards to ensure that schools support and encourage healthful eating.

2) **Vending machine usage:** Restrictions on the types of foods and drinks sold in schools, and on access to vending machines. Five towns are participating in a pilot project to replace “junk food” in vending machines with nutritious food. This is a project of Connecticut Team Nutrition, a joint initiative that includes the University of Connecticut, the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders, the Department of Public Health and the State Department of Education.

3) **Body mass index (BMI)** measured by a child's physician, reported confidentially on a child's health record and used anonymously to measure obesity trends by school and school districts. The new SDE Health Assessment Form (released in January 2005) and Early Childhood Health Assessment Form (released in August 2004) list BMI as an item for the child's physician to complete, but few schools use the information to map student health trends.

4) **Recess and physical education:** Additional time for recess, physical activity and physical education, including a wider range of activities for boys and girls that are enjoyable and non-competitive in order to appeal to a majority of students. Connecticut law requires each student to have daily physical activity, but the law does not specify the amount of time or nature of that activity. *Sports Illustrated* magazine recently featured an innovative physical education program in the Parker Memorial middle school in Tolland, Connecticut, developed with the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education.

5) **Obesity programs and education:** Obesity prevention as part of school curricula and tools to help educators make changes in their own classroom environments.

6) **Municipal planning for active lifestyles:** Comprehensive wellness initiatives that encourage active lifestyles through health, transportation and land use policies and public education and outreach. East Hartford and Ledyard have established community plans to combat obesity and promote health.

7) **Health insurance:** Coverage for the treatment of obesity. Quality improvement and coordination among managed care organizations, health plans, public health systems and disease management programs to reduce childhood and adult obesity.

8) **Youth leadership:** Young people to lead efforts to address the obesity crisis, and a statewide student advisory committee to promote youth leadership in order to reverse child obesity trends.

9) **Statewide infrastructure:** A strong statewide partnership to address and coordinate the response to the childhood obesity epidemic through the identification and dissemination of best practices to schools and communities.

Selected Connecticut legislation on childhood obesity introduced in 2005

R.B. 6631, *An Act Concerning Childhood Obesity* (introduced by the Select Committee on Children), would do the following within available appropriations:

- DPH would establish a childhood obesity program to:
 - (1) develop and implement guidelines for nutrition education and physical activity projects;
 - (2) provide for media health promotion campaigns that emphasize health eating and physical activity;
 - (3) provide for nutrition education and physical activity programs (in conjunction with SDE);
 - (4) provide community-based obesity prevention nutrition education and physical activity programs;
 - (5) incorporate obesity prevention strategies into food assistance, health and recreation programs (in conjunction with DSS and DCF);
 - (6) hold conferences or meetings with experts to examine solutions and issue guidelines for state policy and program; and
 - (7) provide training programs for medical and other health professionals to teach practical skills in nutrition and exercise education to children and parents.
- DPH would evaluate its obesity program and report the evaluation findings to several General Assembly committees by October 1, 2006.

Proposed Bill No. 8, *An Act Concerning School Vending Machines* (introduced by Sen. Crisco), would prohibit each public elementary and middle school from selling soda, candy or any other food that has minimal nutritional value from a vending machine located within the school.

Proposed Bill No. 9, *An Act Concerning Nutritious Public School Lunches* (introduced by Sen. Crisco), would prohibit student cafeterias in public schools from serving any food item that contains more than thirty-five per cent added sugar or more than eight grams of fat.

Proposed Bill No. 130, *An Act to Study Health Insurance Coverage for the Treatment of Obesity* (introduced by Sen. Crisco), would establish a task force to study whether health insurance coverage for the treatment of obesity should be mandated.

Proposed Bill No. 165, *An Act Concerning Unreturned Bottle Deposits and Childhood Nutrition* (introduced by Sen. Harp), would provide that beverage outlets be assessed for a portion of unredeemed moneys collected as can and bottle deposits and that such moneys be used as financial incentives to assist school districts that adopt specific nutrition and physical activity standards. Such funds shall be distributed as grants over a three-year period as schools implement nutrition and physical activity standards and establish fundraising mechanisms. After the three-year grant period, the district is expected to maintain its new standards and the grant money will be available to other districts that implement similar standards. Such standards shall include policies concerning the replacement of food or food coupons as incentives and treats for parties or celebrations with other rewards or recognition, the elimination of the practice of

denying recess or physical activity as a punishment, the adoption of a complete K-12 curriculum that promotes healthy eating and physical activity, adoption of the Department of Education's standards for healthy foods, strict enforcement of laws regarding the sale of competitive foods, restriction of fundraising efforts that use food to the sale of fruits and other healthy items, and maintenance of commitments to meet or exceed weekly recommendations for physical activity of children appropriate to their grade level.

Proposed Bill No. 833, *An Act Concerning Connecticut-Grown Food in Schools* (introduced by Sen. Williams), would require each local and regional board of education to explore methods to increase availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in schools and identify opportunities for the increased procurement and preparation of Connecticut-grown foods in schools.

Proposed Bill No. 834, *An Act Concerning Beverage Sales in Schools* (introduced by Sen. Williams), would require all local and regional boards of education, beginning in the 2005-2006 school year, to limit the types of beverages that may be offered for sale to students or for consumption by students in schools.

Proposed Bill No. 837, *An Act Concerning Recess in Schools* (introduced by Sen. Williams), would require that students be provided with at least twenty minutes per day of recess at all schools.

Proposed Bill No. 842, *An Act Concerning Healthy Food in Schools* (introduced by Sen. Williams), would require the Department of Education, based on the results of its TEAM Nutrition Pilot and Vending Pilot Programs, to publish a recommended list of foods that may be offered for sale or consumption to pupils at Connecticut elementary, middle and secondary schools by August 1, 2005, and that local and regional boards of education may follow such recommendations during the 2005-2006 school year and shall follow such recommendations beginning in the 2006-2007 school year.

Proposed Bill No. 5555, *An Act Establishing Nutritional Standards for Public School Cafeterias* (introduced by Rep. Urban), would require the Department of Education to establish nutritional standards for public school cafeterias.

Proposed Bill No. 6156, *An Act Concerning Class Action Lawsuits for Obesity Claims* (introduced by Rep. Ward), would prohibit the filing of class action civil lawsuits based on claims for obesity.

Proposed Bill No. 6182, *An Act Concerning a Task Force for the Purpose of Adopting a Nutrition Policy for the State* (introduced by Rep. Nafis), would establish a task force to adopt a state nutrition policy and to assist in the reduction and prevention of obesity and non-insulin-using diabetes in children.